THE GREAT AMERICAN TIN CAN

By GEORGE ETHELBERT WALSH

A GOAT is generally supposed to include in his dietary everything from a newspaper to a tin can. As a public scavenger Billy was at one time of immense service to communities that observed the time-honored custom of emptying garbage in their back yards to fill undeveloped lots for future building operations. But that was in the days of easy living, before we made a business of conserving everything and converting all ordinary waste into valuable byproducts. For many a year now poor Billy has been deprived of his favorite newspaper, which go back to the pulp mills instead of into Billy's stomach; and the tin cans, whose fancy labels oft made him think of juicy tomatoes and ripe peaches, are likewise recovered, electrolytically treated to a bath and converted back into sheet tin to begin anew their cycle of existence.

There is a mansion built just off Fifth-ave., New York, that might appropriately be called a "Tin Can House"; not because it is made of tin cans, but because its owner and builder made his fortune in collecting tin cans. When other people despised tin cans and threw them to the Billy goat this man gathered them up, flattened them out, repaired roofs with them. Then he discovered another use for them, and by the time he had a factory established for recovering the scrap tin he had one hundred messengers from sunny Italy picking and buying tin cans for him. Today his well organized force of collectors numbers nearly five hundred, and the part that can find a stray can that has escaped the Argus-eyed force of the tin can merchant must be abroad night and early in the day.

Far up under the Arctic Circle in Alaska is a mining town called Tin City. It was so named because of its location in a new tin producing district. But the real Tin City, every miner of the Klondike will tell you, is not a place officially marked thus on the map, but a mythical city whose geographical location is plainly marked by a score of trails. This Tin City owed its existence to the great American tin can. Its inhabitants were saved from starvation by the tin can, and many a home in it was lighted and heated by this same article of common use which we discard and throw away every day in the year. That first winter in the Klondike was that of tin cans. Milk, fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, and all that man eats were carried there in cans, and when the big cans of oil were emptied of their contents the tin was used for making stoves. The tin can stove was a great institution in Alaska before railroads invaded the region. A miner could sling his homemade cooking stove over his shoulder and walk away to a new camp without considering the weight. When spring came the tin cans were flattened out and made into all sorts of household utensils. Houses were even built of them, and today a score of these pioneer Tin Cities of the Klondike are paved and built and patched up with the discarded cans that went North filled with the delicious edibles of a warmer clime.

The cycle of a tin can is said to be short and prosaically routine. First, the ore in the ground; then the purified ingot; then the terne or sheet tin; then the finished tin can; then, when filled with some luscious fruit or meat, the "hope and pride of the good housewife"; and then—the discarded, rejected shell thrown on the ash heap or in the city's garbage pail. But the period of rejuvenation begins when the secondhand dealer rescues it and starts it back on its swift road to restitution. It loses its identity in the process; but once more it comes forth shining and glossy in its burnished coat ready for the canning factory. That is the ordinary cycle of existence for the average tin can.

Value to Housewives

BUT there are enough exceptions to the rule to make them worthy of a special paragraph. Not to mention the variations of the rule experienced by tin cans tied to the tails of mongrel curs of the streets, or of those which serve so faithfully as drinking cups for the Weary Willies of Trampdom, or of those which go to the corner saloons so often in lieu of a pitcher that they are euphemistically called the "tin growler," it is necessary only to call attention to the uses to which tin cans are put by the ordinary housewife.

A helpful article was published a number of years ago in a magazine devoted to the home and housewife which showed just what to do with old tin cans. The writer explained clearly several hundred useful articles that could be made with the cans. Among these were hanging baskets and flower pots, drinking cups and milk pails, salt and pepper holders, clock cases, pipe racks, paper cutters, pen and pencil holders, book clips, scrap baskets, picture frames, fire screens, and similar articles. All you needed in making these articles of general use were a pair of scissors, some wire, a soldering outfit, a hammer, a few riveting nails—and a little patience and genius.

The American tin can is really a wonderful factor in our national life; but it is one of those modest, shrinking little factors that are likely to be unnoticed unless we stop to consider them. We have so many tin cans around us all the time that we take it as a matter of course that they have always been with us. There are countries today where an American tin can is considered a wonderful prize. Explorers in the heart of darkest Africa have found tribal Kings exhibiting with great pride among their possessions a few shiny, well polished tin cans. In Siberia, along the shores of Bering Strait, native tribes picked up empty tin cans thrown away by some passing whaler and looked upon them as of more value than pearls or rubies. In no less than two South Sea Island tribes, American tin cans were used by chiefs as medicine cups which were supposed to possess charms to banish sickness. But all such fetishism is rapidly being banished from the face of the earth by the manufacturers of American tin cans. They are flooding the world with their products, and soon one cannot be lost anywhere in the desert, the wilderness, or in the cold Arctic regions without finding the companionship of an empty American tin can.

This is said advisedly, as one may fully realize when the output of the industry is considered. We manufacture only a little less than two thousand million tin cans a year, and the output is steadily on the increase. If all these cans were laid end to end, they would belt the globe four times or more. Think of a hundred thousand miles of tin cans, big and little, and all full of something edible or useful! They are all filled. Tin cans are not made for ornament or for idleness; they are made to fill, and American farms, orchards, mines and waters furnish the material that goes into them. If we go back to 1850, we shall find that few tin cans were made or used. People didn't eat canned food then, not to any great extent. In the first place, they were afraid of it; anything put up in cans was viewed with suspicion.

Well, the country was smaller then, and people got along with less. In season they had all the delicacies that could be raised in garden and orchard; but out of season they went without. They didn't begin to have the variety we enjoy on our tables today—and all because they despised the tin can, or didn't know what a blessing it could confer upon mankind. Then came the Civil War, with its great armies in the field to feed, and railroads so inadequate that whole regiments half starved, and the country through which they marched was so denuded of crops that the grasshoppers committed suicide in despair. There was only one possible solution to the problem of feeding the armies in the field; preserved food of some kind had to be furnished and shipped to the men.

Tin Can's Opportunity

THAT was the opportunity of the tin can. It rose to the occasion, and gradually dispelled the suspicion that attached to it. At the close of the Civil War the tin can came into its own, and the following decade witnessed a great interest in the canning industry. Experiments were carried on extensively in every direction, and meat, fruit, vegetables, and fish were put up in cans and shipped to the remotest parts of the earth.

By the time we had another war—the Spanish-American War of 1898—there were two thousand canneries in the country, which put up canned goods worth seventy-two million dollars. The old fear of canned food had disappeared, and about everybody was eating it. We were eating most of this canned food right at home; but for our surplus we shipped three million dollars' worth to other countries. Instead of representing the high water mark of the industry, this was really only the beginning of it. We had learned the art of canning certain food after a certain fashion; but there was much to be learned, and ingenuity and invention set to work to solve all the difficult problems. New processes of canning, and new machinery for making the cans and hermetically sealing them when filled, gave new impetus to the infant industry.

Since 1892 we have been manufacturing our own tin plate. Prior to that time we imported most of the material; but after the industry got well established it jumped from 42,119,000 pounds of terne plates in 1892 to 894,411,000 pounds in 1901. This home manufacture of tin plates gave another impetus to the manufacture of cans, the bulk of the American tin plate product going to can manufacturers. Since 1901 the manufacture of tin plate has increased so rapidly that it represents one of the dozen big industries of the country. The tin can manufacturers have reached out into new fields, and today we can about everything of an edible or useful nature.

As an illustration of the effect the tin can has upon other industries, consider for an instant the fishing business of the two coasts and inland waters. On the Atlantic Coast alone there are enough canning establishments to keep busy three thousand fishing vessels and twenty-five thousand fishermen. These workers are engaged chiefly in deep water fishing. In addition to this two thousand oyster boats are employed gathering the luscious bivalves for canning factories, and twenty thousand men manning the boats or working on the beds and floats. Then there are several thousand more men engaged in gathering clams, lobsters, and scallops for the canning factories. On the Pacific Coast the salmon canneries constitute one of the great industries, and an army of fifty thousand people is employed in them. The factories send canned salmon to every part of the world.

The big meat packers put up millions of dollars' worth of meat in tin cans every year, and this part of their business is almost as extensive as their fresh meat packing. In fruits and vegetables the canning factories have, if possible, made their greatest gain. There isn't a fruit or vegetable grown in America today that isn't canned. They are canned in their original state, such as whole pineapples and corn on the cob, and in all sorts of cut, sliced, quartered, and pulped condition. The tin can has thus not only contributed to the comfort and convenience of the housekeeper at home and abroad, but it has led to a revolution in the growing of vegetables and fruits.

Seasons Have Disappeared

BEFORE the tin can became such an important factor in our national life, immense regions of fertile soil could not be profitably cultivated, on account of the great distance from market. It was found by test that the climate and soil of many of these regions were eminently adapted to the growth and propagation of certain perishable fruits and vegetables. The development of the canning industry brought these favorable districts immediately into touch with the most distant market. Factories were located in the heart of agricultural regions, and farmers would cultivate thousands of acres to furnish canneries with their products. There was no uncertainty about this kind of agriculture. The canneries contracted with the farmers for all their produce at certain prices. There was nothing so sure as this. The owner of good land simply figured out how much produce he could raise to the acre, and his profits could be gaged in advance with accuracy.

The revolution in agriculture created by the tin can has extended to nearly all parts of the country. California puts up in tins millions of dollars' worth of fruits and vegetables, and Florida is not far behind. The Carolinas and Virginia raise several thousand tons of peas, beans, squash, and similar vegetables to be canned green. Maine sweet corn on a tin can is the symbol of all that can be desired in green corn. New Jersey and the South excel in tomatoes put up in cans, and all throughout the West, South, and East canneries are specializing on crops that thrive best in certain locations. With a plentiful supply of canned goods, the traveler in the desert or at the North Pole can live on the luxuries of a rich and fertile land.

There are no seasons for fruits and vegetables,